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Nebraska Students in Transition: The Evolution of a Partnership

Toni Anaya and Charlene Maxey-Harris

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

Introduction

Since 2010, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) libraries have been collaborating with the Office of Admissions on an innovative program working with high school seniors through the Nebraska College Preparatory Academy (NCPA). Over the past 10 years, Nebraska has been affected by Nebraska's dramatic changes in racial and ethnic diversity. Despite a rapid rise in ethnic diversity over the past 10 years, the state was still 90 percent white at the time of the 2010 census. Over the past decade, UNL has been interested in actively recruiting students and faculty from ethnically diverse backgrounds. This initiative centers on recruitment strategies within the state that tap into the cultural richness of Nebraska's residents.

In 2006, Harvey Perlman, chancellor at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, created an innovative program to recruit first-generation, low-income high school seniors through the Nebraska College Preparatory Academy (<https://ncpa.unl.edu/>). The aim of this program is to promote the benefits of higher education among Nebraska's underserved populations and to provide academic and financial

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resources for first-generation, low-income high school students to pursue postsecondary education. NCPA is a unique collaboration between the University Libraries and the Office of Admissions and is funded solely through private donors and grants, unlike similar initiatives focused on supporting first-generation, low-income students, like the nationally recognized and federally funded Upward Bound and the Ronald McNair Scholars program. In November 2008, voters in Nebraska approved a ban on affirmative action, Nebraska Civil Rights Initiative 424 (Ballotpedia 2012), which prohibits discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to individuals or groups based on race, gender, or national origin. This bill has hindered the University of Nebraska's ability to recruit students from diverse populations. The university has altered its approach to attracting students who are first-generation college attendees with low income and experiences living or working in diverse communities. In 2009, despite these challenges, the university celebrated the most ethnically and racially diverse freshman class in its 140-year history (UNL 2009).

Literature review

The review of the literature centers on libraries providing programming and services to high school students or first year freshman college students from these special populations: underrepresented groups, first-generation college attendees, Generation 1.5 students, and economically disadvantaged students. The term Generation 1.5 has been used in the literature to describe immigrant students who move to the United States at the age of 12 or older and enroll in school in the United States (Rumbaut and Ima 1988). Emily Love (2009) explored the ways libraries support underrepresented students. She provides a thorough review of the various ways libraries have worked with students of color over the years. The majority of the activities focused on the library's role in supporting the Upward Bound and Ronald McNair Scholars programs, and student peer-to-peer mentoring programs. In addition, relationships cultivated with cultural centers, multicultural services, and other academic support departments yield a growth of library programs and instruction to students.

As colleges and universities strive to increase the number students of color on campus, several studies focus on library usage and information literacy for this group. Ethelene Whitmire's (2003, 2004) studies on library usage are pivotal for other growing research in this area. Based on her research, she determines differences between Asian American, African American, Latino, Native American and white undergraduates. She found that "students of color are using the library at higher rates than White undergraduates" (2003, 160). According to Haras and colleagues "Generation 1.5 are neither international students nor do they see themselves as ESL learners. They are somewhere in between first-generation, adult immigrants who are foreign-educated and second generation, U.S. born, English speaking children of immigrants. Generation 1.5 students often grow up without academic skills in their first language; they may not experience growth in their first language skills; they may be English-dominant yet not identify with English; or, they may be English-dominant without experiencing its full linguistic range" (2008, 426).

Many generation 1.5 population studies focus on U.S. Latino high school and first-year students in urban settings and their attitudes toward libraries and research skills. Some of the studies link information literacy to academic performance (Adkins and Hussey 2006; Asher, Case and Zhong 2009; Haras, Lopez and Ferry 2008; Haras 2011. Shoge (2003) surveyed African American undergraduate and graduate professional students in Delaware and Maryland on their perceptions of library activities and its impact on their academic performance.

Overall, there is the perception that just being in the library improves academic performance; however, this perception does not translate into academic success. To impact academic performance, students need to know about academic libraries' services and the resources as well as how to use these services and resources effectively. Central themes in the studies suggest first-year students of color do not associate academic libraries with the development of research and critical thinking skills. Academic libraries need to direct their attention to finding out what the needs of underrepresented students are and then develop a plan to begin meeting their needs and make their academic spaces (physical and online) inviting to these students. Libraries continue to need to edge their way into existing academic support services and admissions programs to offer tours, instruction, and

programming. Establishing these partnerships opens the pathway to building collaborative learning projects and developing ways to impact student retention.

Background

NCPA targets students from two high schools, one rural and one urban, with similar demographics. There have been 294 scholars involved in the program at Grand Island Senior High School (GISH) and Omaha North Magnet High School (ONMHS), with 38 seniors active in the program during the 2011-2012 academic year. The Grand Island school district serves 8,350 students, of whom more than 69 percent are Hispanic. GISH, which is located in Grand Island, Nebraska, is the only public high school in the Grand Island public district, and enrollment is 2,114. The ethnic and racial makeup of students is predominantly white (53 percent) and Hispanic (42 percent). See **Table 1** for a complete breakdown by race and ethnicity. This high school is considered to be in a rural area of Nebraska (NCES 2010, GISH). In contrast, the Omaha public school district serves 48,690 students. Omaha North Magnet High School is one of seven public high schools and resides in the largest city in Nebraska. The student enrollment is 1,940. The ethnicity and race of these students is predominantly African American (47 percent) and white (44 percent). Table 1 provides a complete overview of ONMHS student ethnicity and race (NCES 2010, ONMHS).

The selection process for NCPA is competitive and is handled through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Admissions. Admissions officers select high achieving promising ninth grade students to join a cohort of their peers (NCPA scholars) and complete a 9-12 curriculum focused on science and math to prepare them for the rigors of college coursework. NCPA scholars and their parents also participate in a community-based college access counseling program to learn about college admission and the financial aid application process. Of the scholars involved in the program, 83 percent belong to a racial or ethnic minority, and 100 percent are low-income, first-generation students. The scholars' average high school grade point average (GPA) is currently 3.39 (on a 4.0 scale), which is an impressive indicator of the program's potential.

Table 1. Nebraska College Preparatory School (NCPA) student ethnicity and race

<i>NCPA High Schools</i>	<i>Enrollment (2009-2010)</i>	<i>Ethnic and Racial Breakdown of High School Students</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Grand Island Senior High (GISH) (rural)	2,114	White	53
		Hispanic	42
		African American	2
		Asian/Pacific Islander	2
		American Indian/Alaskan Native	1
Omaha North Magnet High School (ONMHS) (urban)	1,940	African American	47
		White	44
		Hispanic	5
		Asian/Pacific Islander	2
		American Indian/Alaskan Native	1

Following high school graduation, NCPA scholars who complete their senior capstone research poster, who maintain the required GPA, and whose parents have sufficiently engaged in the college access program are guaranteed a full scholarship to UNL (3.0 or higher GPA) or Metro Community College (2.5-2.99 GPA). Once students accept the scholarship to UNL and transition from high school to college, they become members of the Institute of Excellence (IOE), a retention program for NCPA scholars. The library's collaborative goal with the IOE is to support and teach these scholars information and research skills needed to be successful in their first two years at the university.

Evolution of a partnership

Opportunity often knocks on doors yet to be opened. A prime example of this is the evolution of the collaborative partnership between the UNL libraries and the UNL Office of Admissions.

Initially, the diversity and multicultural studies librarians approached the Office of Admissions because they wanted to provide outreach services to prospective students involved recruitment programs. These services included exhibits and library tours highlighting services, resources, and student employment opportunities. Librarians also attended and led workshops at campus diversity symposiums.

Soon these services began to include one-time instruction sessions for related groups such as Upward Bound summer visits and students on academic probation. These one-shot, or single meeting, instruction sessions included interactive group projects and scavenger hunts to connect students with the various library collections and services.

In 2008, new opportunities to collaborate with UNL admissions officers developed when the diversity and multicultural studies librarians were invited to create a pilot library program designed to prepare Summer Institute for Promising Scholars (SIPS), a group of incoming minority and first-generation students, with research skills to succeed in college. This transitional program, SIPS, provided academic credit and a book scholarship for students who successfully complete the five-week program. Librarians redesigned the five-week Introduction to Library Research online course in partnership with the UNL English department so that the research class supported coursework research in the English 151 course. Students worked in small groups on their final project for the English course. Each group created a poster presentation, which served as the final summer capstone research project and was presented at the final program celebration. After the successful outcome of the final project, this model was then incorporated into the new chancellor's initiative, Nebraska College Preparatory Academy.

Nebraska College Preparatory Academy

Librarians initially met with the NCPA assistant admissions director regarding the NCPA program in late 2008. At that time, the Office of Admissions was unsure how to move forward with the requirements of the program. The following fall, due to the libraries' involvement with SIPS and the successful creation of the capstone research component with that program, the Office of Admissions invited the diversity and multicultural studies librarians to create and coordinate the research component for a small pilot group of nine Omaha North High School students in the first NCPA 2010 senior graduating class. The Grand Island Senior High School senior class was not required to complete a research capstone due to differences in the initial program creation.

Active work in the pilot group of the first cohort of NCPA scholars began in the fall of 2009, with library instruction provided by UNL librarians in collaboration with high school teachers. Librarians worked with the group throughout the school year rather than providing one-time instruction sessions. Library instruction embedded into the school year allows students to build upon skills learned and provides support to high school teachers.

In 2010, a three-day summer library research boot camp was developed for the incoming NCPA 2011 senior graduating class, the second cohort. This boot camp allows students to focus on research skills and working in teams without the pressure of being in school. Librarians engage students in critical thinking activities, discuss characteristics of the academic environment, and teach about using library resources. The concepts introduced at the boot camp are also reinforced with exercises throughout students' senior year to support their English research project. These exercises include the use of research logs, one-minute feedback papers, checklists for scholarly information, and citing sources. Assessments are built into the exercises as well. NCPA goals align with some of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Standards for Information Literacy*. At the end of the year it is expected that students will be able to:

1. Describe different types of information resources in order to identify the forms needed to complete their project
2. Construct an effective search statement in order to locate and select appropriate information resources
3. Evaluate the quality of information found in their search in order to determine validity (ACRL 2000)

In addition to these goals, librarians help students develop presentation skills and knowledge about academic culture and expectations of college classes. In the spring, students complete their posters for the final capstone project and proudly display them to their teachers, school administrators, and University of Nebraska administrators.

The library component has grown considerably since the first senior graduating class of nine students in 2010. The senior capstone research project is now a required component of the program for both participating schools.

Table 2. NCPA/IOE Scholars

	<i>Grand Island (GISH)</i>	<i>Omaha North (ONMHS)</i>	<i>Total Enrollment at Community College</i>	<i>Total Enrollment at UNL</i>
First Cohort 2010 Senior Class	24	9*	0	33
Second Cohort 2011 Senior Class	26*	0	3	23
Third Cohort 2012 Senior Class	31*	7*	0	38

In 2010 and 2011, librarians worked with the second cohort, which consisted of 26 seniors from GISH. ONMHS did not have a senior NCPA scholar class. For the 2011-2012 school year, UNL librarians worked with a group of 38 students from both high schools in the third cohort. Program completion rates for NCPA seniors have improved in just two years. In 2010, the first year librarians worked with NCPA, 77 percent of seniors completed their projects and agreed to attend UNL. As of August 2011, 85 percent of NCPA seniors matriculated at UNL, while the remaining 15 percent are attending other area colleges (NCPA 2011). See **Table 2** for complete college matriculation data for NCPA scholars by cohort.

The impact of this collaboration has far-reaching implications; the UNL Office of Admissions has committed to supporting this program through 2020 and wishes to maintain libraries' role in coordinating the capstone research project. The opportunity to provide support and instruction to over 1,000 students over the course of the NCPA program is exciting and will allow the libraries to directly impact the recruitment and retention of first-generation, low-income students at UNL, which is a priority goal of the university, as stated in Chancellor Perlman's 2011 State of the University address (UNL 2011). The interpersonal relationships developed with students will also impact student persistence, retention, and confidence as well as encourage leadership development on campus.

Students in transition

The Institute of Excellence, the college group for the NCPA students, is in its second year of development. UNL libraries now support 33 students as they transition from their homes in rural and urban areas to matriculate at UNL. The collaborative goal is to support and teach these scholars information and research skills needed to be successful during their first two years in college. The library is currently incorporating this program library-wide as the program grows to recruit and retain over 100 NCPA/IOE scholars per year over the next 10 years.

Initial results

Efforts by the library include providing services such as mini library “boot camps” where students receive short, intense instruction sessions based upon topics previously covered in other programs. This integrated method of providing instruction, according to recent research by Wong and Cmor (2011), is a key way to impact student learning and academic performance. The instruction offered throughout the semester changes based on students’ point of need and covers issues such as the virtual library, proper citation, and research basics.

Retention rates for the first cohort of the group, a total of 33 students, was approximately 88 percent, with slightly over 50 percent meeting the NCPA scholarship qualifications with a 2.78 GPA. In comparison, overall retention rates for first-time, full-time freshman at UNL was 83.6 percent (University of Nebraska-Lincoln 2012). Overall, NCPA students have been successful transitioning to the university when compared to other first-year students. In 2011, UNL enrolled 23 freshman scholars in the second cohort of IOE, all of whom are still attending classes.

Much is being done to encourage NCPA and IOE scholars to succeed; however, there are some challenges. While each participating high school has different obstacles to overcome, there are some common issues students face, including preparation in math, reading comprehension, and writing; social integration and personal (family) struggles; and issues with emotional and mental wellness due to the harsh conditions of poverty (NCPA 2011). These challenges are consistent

with those identified by Barry and colleagues (2009). While student and family commitment is strong at the rural school (GISH), it creates challenges for those students once they move into residential housing; being the first to leave the family home to go off to college causes stress for not only the student, but also for family members. These challenges leave students with concerned parents who lack the knowledge to help them navigate the university's bureaucratic system.

Students at the urban school (ONMHS) face similar familial circumstances; however, the level of commitment from their parents continues to evolve. Scholar and parental participation contrasts sharply between the two high schools. While GISH has a large cohort each year, ONMHS continues to have small groups enrolled and active in NCPA. One possible reason for this disparity is the number of competing programs and/or opportunities for students in Omaha. With the varied requirements of the program, parents may fail to participate, assuming their child will receive aid from other programs that do not require such a high level of parental participation. GISH has many fewer recruitment programs, and school administrators are empowered to accommodate the program's special academic needs.

Conclusion

Not only are the UNL libraries helping these students to transition, the services provided by the libraries are also in transition as they develop this new program. More individuals are being integrated into the *NCPA/IOE* work team, and efforts are being made to create collaborative relationships with the school librarians as well as teachers at participating schools. As research projects are developed over the course of the year, the multicultural studies and diversity librarian program coordinators plan to incorporate more subject specialists to aid students in the research and development of their projects as a way to build early connections to areas of research.

These efforts will allow the library staff to play a more holistic role in recruitment and retention of these students. Future goals include developing curriculum for younger students in NCPA to begin teaching information literacy in their first three years of involvement as well as creating assessment tools to aide in evaluating impact. Research

opportunities are also developing to create a research study to investigate the impact of library bibliographic instruction and the development of information literacy on first-generation students from high school through college graduation. Based on the library usage studies reviewed in the literature, we are also interested in studying the attitudes and library experiences of Generation 1.5 students from rural settings. As larger numbers of students join the Institute of Excellence as university students, it will be interesting to explore which skills need to be revisited, their academic performance, and retention of these scholars compared to peers of similar background not involved in the program. As we continue to develop the program, assessment of the assignments and exercises will inform us of the quality of the end product and new directions for instruction.

These preparatory and transition programs are important not only to libraries, but also to retention efforts. This model allows the library to be directly involved with preparing first-generation students to succeed in college and giving them the skills they need to be successful. Students need to understand how to use reference materials, find books, evaluate scholarly articles, and properly cite their sources. Research has shown that students do not understand the benefits of using an academic library instead of the public library (Adkins and Hussey 2006; Haras 2011). By reinforcing the advantages of using an academic library and increasing student exposure to a large variety of library staff, we are ensuring our library is a welcoming place for students and encouraging them to discover opportunities to explore the library profession. The coordinating librarians provide a multiethnic perspective, have firsthand experience as first-generation college attendees, and are familiar with many of the barriers and challenges faced by this group of students. They serve as role models for the profession, thus opening the pipeline to introduce these students to library and information careers. Students gain the self-confidence to understand how to use these resources to share with their colleagues as they develop as leaders. They will also know how to work with faculty and know their perspective and experience are valued through other learning communities on campus.

As institutes of higher education begin to focus on providing access to students from low-income, first-generation families, libraries must be ready to provide appropriate services to this population. They must

recognize the level of need, understand the challenges, and be willing to answer the door when nontraditional opportunities come knocking.

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